

I. Dynasty 30

Chapter 30: The Scent of Danger

That evening, Qin Mu delivered the spices to the Qi Prince's residence.

"Such a wonderful scent!" Lü Luo grabbed a handful of spices and held them to her nose, closing her eyes in enjoyment.

Ziyuan examined the spices and said, "Your Highness, these are agarwood, balsam, dried jasmine flowers, dried tulips, and borneol. I am somewhat familiar with spices from my time in the palace, and these are indeed of the highest quality."

"Good. We cannot afford any mistakes when presenting a gift to the Empress," Xiao Ming replied.

Lü Luo asked curiously, "Your Highness, are you planning to gift these spices directly to the Empress? But Her Majesty already has a vast collection of spices. Even though these are fine, they may not necessarily impress her."

Ziyuan shot Lü Luo a glance and said, "Foolish girl, didn't you notice? His Highness also bought alcohol. Clearly, he's not just giving her raw spices."

Xiao Ming nodded. "Of course. In a few days, when the tools arrive, I'll personally show you what I'm making."

Three days later, Chen Qi delivered the distillation apparatus that Xiao Ming had requested—essentially three interconnected ceramic containers.

During these three days, Xiao Ming had not been idle. He gathered the servants of the residence and explained the process of distilling alcohol and extracting essential oils.

Once the distillation apparatus arrived, the servants promptly set it up, using a coal stove beneath it to refine alcohol and extract essential oils.

This project put the entire household into a flurry of activity. While Qian Dafu led a group to mine graphite, Lü Luo and Ziyuan joined in to help.

Over the past few days, Lü Luo and Ziyuan had also received a crash course from Xiao Ming. When the alcohol and essential oils began to drip from the distillation apparatus, they carefully collected them into delicate porcelain bottles and began mixing them thoroughly.

Xiao Ming had a vast knowledge of perfume-making, with countless formulas in his mind.

In essence, perfume consisted of essential oils, fixatives, and alcohol.

The essential oils were extracted from various plants, while fixatives, such as balsam, were oil-rich substances that stabilized the scent—similar to the base ingredients in modern facial creams.

Xiao Ming was well-versed in the precise ratios needed. Since this was the first batch, there was no need for experimentation, and the process went smoothly.

The final step was to mix everything together.

Two distillation setups operated simultaneously—one refining alcohol, the other extracting essential oils—while the rest of the household shook the bottles vigorously to blend the ingredients.

Even Xiao Ming took a bottle and shook it, preferring to keep active in the freezing weather rather than standing still.

“Your Highness, how long do we have to shake this?” Lü Luo panted, her breath forming white clouds in the cold air. Her face was flushed from exertion.

Xiao Ming instructed, “Open the bottle and take a sniff. If the scent is evenly distributed, then it’s ready.”

Lü Luo nodded, pulled out the stopper, and took a deep breath. She froze in surprise. “Your Highness, this smells amazing!”

Ziyuan also leaned in to take a whiff, her expression turning to one of astonishment. “These spices were already fragrant, but this scent has a unique depth. Your Highness, how is this meant to be used?”

In Great Yu, fragrances were typically crafted into incense cakes and applied by rubbing or burning. This liquid perfume was an entirely new concept.

Xiao Ming explained, "It's simple—just dab a little onto your skin."

Curious, Lü Luo poured a small amount onto her hand and applied it to her face. Instantly, a delicate jasmine fragrance filled the air.

Ziyuan, feeling envious, quickly followed suit.

"Well? Isn't it much better than incense cakes? The scent will last for a whole day," Xiao Ming said with a smile.

Lü Luo giggled happily, sniffing herself and then Ziyuan, like an excited child.

Ziyuan also smiled. This perfume, as Xiao Ming called it, was truly remarkable. Incense cakes had to be rubbed onto the skin and easily wore off, whereas this perfume was far more convenient.

"Your Highness, if this perfume is gifted to the Empress, she will undoubtedly be delighted," Ziyuan remarked.

Xiao Ming felt reassured. Since both Lü Luo and Ziyuan had spent time in the palace, their opinions carried weight. "In that case, I have nothing to worry about. We've made about a hundred bottles this time. You two can each keep one."

“Thank you, Your Highness!” Lü Luo beamed and curtsied, while Ziyuan hugged her porcelain bottle as if it were a precious treasure, afraid that Xiao Ming might change his mind.

Though they had used up all the essential oils, there was still a significant amount of leftover rice wine.

Not wanting to waste it—and finding it too unpalatable to drink—Xiao Ming decided to refine it into a more potent liquor.

“Li San.”

Xiao Ming wasn’t familiar with all the servants yet, but he had taken note of Li San.

Li San was a talkative and efficient worker, and Ziyuan had spoken well of him.

Qian Dafu was too busy, and Xiao Ming couldn’t always rely on Lü Luo and Ziyuan, as some tasks weren’t suitable for women.

“Yes, Your Highness! I’m here!” Li San jogged over. “What do you need?”

Looking at the cheerful, clever servant, Xiao Ming said, “Prepare a few large wine jars and distill the remaining rice wine.”

“Understood, Your Highness!” Li San immediately ordered the other servants to fetch the jars from the storage room and continued the distillation process.

Unlike the earlier perfume-making, where the rice wine was repeatedly distilled to obtain high-proof alcohol, this time they distilled it only once.

The murky green rice wine was transformed into a clear, potent spirit.

It retained the sweet aroma of rice wine, but its alcohol content had increased significantly.

In the past, people boasted about drinking a thousand cups without getting drunk, but that was only because traditional rice wine had a low alcohol content. This newly distilled liquor, however, would be a different story.

The entire household spent the whole day distilling rice wine and making perfume. By nightfall, all the ingredients had been used up.

“Li San, store the distillation apparatus away. No one else is to see it, and you are not to reveal what it’s used for,” Xiao Ming instructed. He knew that proprietary technology needed to be kept secret.

Li San thumped his chest confidently. “Rest assured, Your Highness! Even if they beat me to death, I won’t say a word.”

Xiao Ming nodded approvingly. “Good. But I have another task for you. I need you to take these perfumes to the capital and deliver them to my mother, the Consort.”

“To the capital? Your Highness, the journey to Chang’an is over a thousand miles. If I go alone and run into bandits on the way...” Li San hesitated.

“No need to worry. You’ll be traveling with the Qin family’s trading ships,” Xiao Ming reassured him.

After all, he had recently given the Qin family a hard time—it was only fair to offer them a little incentive now. The strategy of balancing sticks and carrots had to be applied wisely.